



Equity Committee

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Inclusivity Training in Iowa Schools

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Position

It is the position of the Iowa Youth Congress, the voice of Iowa's youth, to modify Iowa Administrative Code (281), Chapter 12.1(1) to provide exact details on the training school faculty should receive to promote diversity in the classroom.

Current Situation

Diversity training is a hot topic right now in public schools all across the country. With adequate diversity training in place, there is less discrimination and more cultural and social group awareness between teachers and students. According to the US Department of Education, students of color are expected to make up 56% of the student population (both private and public) by 2024. More than 82% of school teachers in the nation are white. In Iowa, 95.6% of teachers are white. The improvement of teachers' knowledge in cultural diversity can not be more crucial. The National Center for Education Statistics predicts that there will be a dramatic increase in the diversity of students in the U.S. education system in the near future. Further, it is estimated by the National Center for Education Statistics that White students will only account for 46% of the public school student population by 2024. This would be a 5% difference from the estimated population of White students in the public school system in 2012 (51%). The trend of increasing diversity rates is predicted to continue, therefore, it is essential to provide both educational staff and students with adequate diversity training. Diversity training will allow students and faculty to form a more cohesive relationship and will subsequently allow students to develop crucial diversity awareness skills that they will need when they graduate and enter into one of the world's most diverse workplaces to date.

Rationale

A lack of comprehensive diversity training in the public school system results in a reduced ability to prevent incidents of classroom discrimination, which has several negative effects on students. A 2019 Harvard Business Review study, in which employees at a company participated in a one-hour diversity training program, found that, "The bias-focused training had a positive effect on the attitudes of one important group: employees who we believe were the least supportive of women prior to training. We found that after completing training, these employees were more likely to acknowledge discrimination against women, express support for policies designed to help women, and acknowledge their own racial and gender biases, compared to similar employees in the control group." Currently, there is almost no published research regarding diversity training in public schools (especially at the state level), demonstrating how dire and lacking of an issue that diversity training in education is.

Meanwhile, a 2015 study of a Kentucky elementary school with approximately 14% Latino children and no comprehensive diversity training course, found over 60% of the Latino children reportedly faced verbal or treatment discrimination from peers, and 42% claimed to experience discrimination from a teacher at least once. Christia Spears Brown, an Associate Professor of developmental psychology and the author of the paper in which this study was reported, stated that “Even when controlling for their actual performance, children who experience discrimination from teachers feel worse about their academic abilities and are less likely to feel they belong at school, when compared against students who do not experience discrimination.” With these results, Dr. Brown later stated in the paper: “Adequate and appropriate teacher training helps ensure that immigrant children have equal access to high-quality pedagogy that is culturally sensitive.”

The aforementioned Harvard Business Review study promotes the idea that diversity training improves minority staff confidence in standing up for themselves and others by stating: “But we saw that among junior women in the U.S., those who took the bias training (as compared to those who did not) used this initiative to seek out mentorship from more senior colleagues at the company, regardless of gender. The training prompted these women to be more proactive about their own advancement.” Without this initiative, employees (especially those of minorities and lower status), as inferred by the study, will do less in being “proactive about their own advancement”, meaning that not only will a lack of diversity training impact students, but it will also promote negative balances at the staff level. A school is also a workplace, so why is diversity training not mandated for teachers? If Iowa were to mandate diversity training for teachers, we would no doubt see a decrease in continuous discrimination and an increase in the overall positivity of the classroom.

Recommended Action

The Iowa Administrative Code Chapter 12.1(1) states: “Each school district shall take affirmative steps to integrate students in attendance centers and courses” (Iowa Legislative Services Agency) However, the Administrative Code does not include any guidelines on the affirmative steps, meaning that individual school districts are fully responsible for detailing the affirmative steps. This creates an issue as teachers may not receive proper training regarding diversity in the classroom, and although some schools may offer this already, it is imperative to create a statewide standard for all schools to follow. We can solve this by making simple modifications to the code by outlining the affirmative steps. More specifically, we recommend that the Iowa law adapts something similar to, for example, the Building University of Iowa Leadership for Diversity (BUILD) program run at the University of Iowa. This program includes training during which participants in the program learn by doing workshops about the importance of inclusion, successful communication, resolving conflicts, and more (The University of Iowa). The BUILD program is a great example of a comprehensive inclusivity program that gives a better understanding of specific identity groups, making it a suitable potential framework for other programs.

Iowa Youth Congress, the voice of Iowa’s youth, proposes to modify this sentence in the Iowa Administrative Code Chapter 12.1(1) to state: “Each school district shall take affirmative steps to integrate students in attendance centers and courses. These steps shall include, but are not limited to, annual seminars on the importance of diversity for educators which will focus on all types of discrimination and diversity (racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.). The superintendent shall be in charge of showing these seminars, and should do his or her best to ensure the seminars are formidable and engaging. The superintendent will submit a yearly compliance report to the Iowa Department of Education to ensure the district’s diversity program is sufficient.” To increase inclusivity in classrooms, it starts with the teachers.

A classroom's behavior will be as proper or chaotic as the teacher intends it to be, and it is up to the teachers to determine how to handle discrimination issues when they occur. To do this, teachers need the proper tools and preparation to ensure that each student has equal opportunity to learn, as is also outlined in Chapter 12 of the Iowa Administrative Code (Iowa Legislative Services Agency). Thus, it is of the utmost importance that this modification is implemented, for the good of all students in Iowa.

Regards,

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Iowa Youth Congress

Sources

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